

How to stay healthy this Christmas

December 18 2007



At Christmas it can be hard to stay healthy. The average Christmas dinner contains over 1,400 calories, 70 per cent of the total calorie intake for an adult woman (2,000 calories a day) and over half the amount for an adult man (2,500 calories a day). But don't worry - with a bit of thought and guidance from Bristol University experts, you can stay healthy and still have a good time.

With so many treats around and the temptation to sleep them off in front of the TV, it's no wonder that people gain an average of 5lb (2kg) over Christmas. It only takes an extra helping of pudding and a few more glasses of wine or chocolates and suddenly you've had all your daily calories in one sitting.

Sue Baic, Registered Dietician and Lecturer in Nutrition and Public

Health at Bristol University, said: “At Christmas we're always surrounded by lots of lovely food and drink. It's easy to over-eat. It's important to enjoy yourself over the festive period but taking some simple steps can contribute to a healthy and enjoyable festival period. It may even stop you worrying about the post-Christmas crash diet.

“While many of the traditional foods are actually very low in fat, it's the trimmings and extra nibbles that can add the pounds. So go easy on these and take smaller portions of the roast potatoes, gravy, puddings and stilton.”

Sue recommends the following simple tips to eat, drink and be healthy over the Christmas period:

Make healthy Christmas dinner choices

- For starters try melon or smoked salmon. Salmon is a good source of omega-3 fatty acids that are needed for a healthy heart. Another option is a hearty healthy soup made from seasonal vegetables such as parsnips, turnips, carrots, cauliflower, celery and leeks.
- Pile on the vegetables! Brussels sprouts, peas and carrots all contain antioxidants, which can help protect against heart disease and cancer. Resist the temptation to cover them in butter or any other fatty spread. Remember, frozen, tinned, dried and fresh vegetables all count towards the recommended five portions a day.
- Turkey is low in fat and high in protein so feel free to have an extra slice or two, but don't eat the skin or you'll add more fat and calories.
- Roast potatoes using a vegetable oil spray, olive oil or sunflower oil. Cut them into large chunks so they'll absorb less fat. Goose fat is so last year.

- Christmas pudding is quite low in fat and a small portion goes a long way. Try serving it with low-fat custard or crème fraiche. A baked apple or fresh fruit salad with natural yoghurt is also a good option with the fruit giving you valuable fibre and vitamins.

Select healthy snacks

- Satsumas are a great source of Vitamin C so be sure to have a large bowl of these and other fruits available.
- Choose reduced-fat crisps or pretzels and serve raw vegetables with low-fat dips.
- Dried fruit is a lovely, healthy snack with lots to choose from, such as dates, figs and apricots.

Eat breakfast

Make sure everyone in your house eats a healthy breakfast. Start Christmas Day with a glass of fruit juice, wholegrain cereal (such as Weetabix or Ready Brek) or a couple of slices of wholemeal toast. This will give you a slow release of energy, keeping your spirits up during the present-opening and dinner preparations.

Use herbs and spices to flavour food

Try to limit how much salt you eat. Salt can increase blood pressure which can increase the risk of heart attack and stroke. Experiment with herbs and spices in your food instead.

Recognise when enough is enough

Choose to be full, not stuffed. Listen to your body and stop eating and drinking before you have to loosen your belt. Instead of suffering for the next hour while your body tries to digest, you can enjoy time with friends and family and look forward to the next meal.

Remember, being active is just as important as healthy eating and a great way of burning off those extra calories. It can also keep children and guests entertained, avoiding any potential cabin fever that comes from spending too much time indoors. Physical activity is also a great way of reducing stress levels (and let's face it, Christmas can be stressful). So wrap up and march out - you'll feel a whole lot better for minimum effort.

Here are some tips for getting active during the holidays and into the New Year:

Leave the house: Instead of watching the same old films and repeats, go outside and get moving.

Take a walk: There are plenty of places for walking. Walk to nearby friends and family instead of taking the car.

Enjoy those presents: If anyone in your family was lucky enough to receive presents such as a football or bike, go and use them, and get all your Christmas guests outside to join in the fun.

Give and receive activity-based presents: Walking shoes, a trial gym membership, dance classes, a trampoline - anything that will help you, your family and your friends to get active. There are so many sports, exercise classes, gyms and activities to choose from, there really is something for everyone of all ages and abilities. Choosing the activity that's right for you increases your likelihood of sticking with it long after

the rush of New Year's resolutions have gone. Why not try a few taster sessions to find the activity you really like?

Join forces: You're more likely to stick with an activity and healthy eating if you do it with a friend or family member. It makes it much more fun and means you'll have someone to motivate you on the days you just don't feel like it.

Cut back on smoking: For smokers the whirl of social events and stresses of the season can make it difficult to give up during the holidays. However, now would be a good time to think about giving up in the New Year. Why not book an appointment with a Smoking Cessation Advisor at your local pharmacy or GP? Smoking is a difficult habit to break but with support you are three times more likely to succeed. Until then try to not increase how much you smoke over Christmas and avoid smoking around children and non-smokers. More information about giving up smoking is available at www.gosmokefree.co.uk/.

Karen Harvey, Healthy Lifestyle Manager at Bristol University's Centre for Sport, Exercise & Health, said: "One of the best presents you can give yourself and your family is good health. It won't max out the credit card, it'll always be in fashion, neither batteries nor frustrating home assembly are required, and everyone can enjoy it!"

"Christmas doesn't make us immune from all the illness associated with unhealthy food and lack of exercise. But it does provide lots of opportunities to try out new activities and healthy foods with friends and family."

Source: University of Bristol

Citation: How to stay healthy this Christmas (2007, December 18) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2007-12-healthy-christmas.html>

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